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ON PAGE A1

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Inquiries Look at Origin of Arms Sitting Unclaimed in Honduran Warehouse

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 21 — A large cache of Soviet-made arms sitting unclaimed and unsalable in a warehouse in Honduras has become one of the latest mysteries emerging from the Federal and Congressional investigations of the private network to arm the Nicaraguan rebels.

Congressional investigators and Administration officials have been looking into the possibility that the purchase and delivery of the weapons were arranged by Lieut. Col. Oliver L. North, the dismissed National Security Council aide who was directing private efforts to aid the rebels, also known as contras.

These sources said that there was no direct evidence tying Colonel North to the shipments. Several sources said the cache could be a result of an arms deal gone sour that was put together without United States Government help.

But a Honduran with close ties to Honduran military and Government officials said the initial shipments were delivered by a Danish freighter known to have been subsequently used by Colonel North's associates to ferry arms to the contras.

Administration officials said the Central Intelligence Agency had refused to let any of the \$100 million that Congress provided to the contras be spent on the weapons because it was unknown who paid for them.

A lawyer for the Miami arms dealer who brokered the weapons, which the dealer offered to the contras for \$20 million, said today that a private "foreign interest" had initially paid for the arms, which include Kalashnikov assault rifles.

The lawyer, Theodore Klein, said the initial purchaser had planned to sell them to the Honduran military, which in turn would sell them to the contras. Mr. Klein insisted that Colonel North had no part in shipping the weapons or in any other aspect of the deal.

But the officials and investigators said they were intrigued by where the money came from to underwrite the multimillion-dollar cost of buying the weapons and shipping them to Central America. The weapons piled in the warehouse, they said, could help explain how some of the tens of millions dollars contributed by foreign Governments on behalf of the contras was spent.

The Honduran source said he was unsure who had paid for the weapons, which are now being stored in a warehouse owned by the Honduran military in Tegucigalpa. The source said the arms were to be sold to the contras by a small group of Honduran military officers, who would share the profits with the two American arms brokers who arranged the deal. Cooperation of Honduran military officials has been essential in maintaining the flow of arms to the contras.

Dispute in Honduran Military

The weapons have become a matter of dispute within the Honduran military, with junior officers charging that the deal is one of several cases involving corruption by senior officers who have profited from supplying the contras. The young officers charged that profits rather than national interests had motivated the support of their superiors for the contras.

Administration officials said the C.I.A. and the State Department had been adamant about not buying the weapons, which are like those already used by the contra forces.

"The weapons were put there by somebody who was waiting for a deal to take place," a well-placed American official said. "We don't have any idea who's behind it. We don't know whether it's drug money, laundered money or what. That's why we're staying as far away from this as possible."

According to both Administration officials and the Honduran source, the deal was brokered by Ronald Martin, who is associated with a Miami-based concern called R. M. Equipment.

He formerly had an interest in the Tamiami Gun Shop in Miami, Mr. Klein said. That concern has been selling Soviet-bloc weapons to the contras in the two years since Congress cut off direct military aid, according to a Congressional source.

Mr. Klein, the attorney for Mr. Martin, said today, "The weapons would not have been shipped if there were not assurances they would be paid for." He declined to identify the original purchaser of the arms, which he said were bought mostly in Western Europe, beyond saying it was a "private foreign interest" and not a government.

Honduras Has Not Paid

He said the Honduran military had taken possession of the weapons, but had not yet paid for them. He added

that Mr. Martin would soon take legal action against Honduras if he was not paid.

Aside from the uncertainties about the financing of the weapons, the deal did not go forward because the weapons were overpriced, according to American and Honduran sources. One source familiar with the arms discussions said, for example, that the Soviet-made AK-47 rifle was offered at \$160 a rifle, as opposed to a price of \$110 on the international market.

Questions for Investigators

One aspect of the deal that has puzzled investigators is the timing of the shipments to Honduras. According to Administration officials, the weapons began arriving in Honduras in mid-1985 and continued to arrive at the warehouse in early 1986, when Congress appeared on the verge of resuming aid to the contras.

In the same period, weapons deliveries arranged by Colonel North and his associates were flowing to the contras.

This raises several questions for investigators. They wonder why the unidentified purchaser would market the Soviet-made weapons in Central America, where the only plausible users would be the Nicaraguan or the Salvadoran rebels. If the deal involved the Hondurans and a private foreign interest, they want to know if American officials assured the Hondurans that the C.I.A. would buy the weapons after Congress approved aid to the contras.

The Honduran source recalled that the first of the shipments had been delivered by a ship whose arrival caused a stir in Honduras when Reuters reported it on June 5, 1985. The Reuters report quoted port officials in Puerto Cortés, a town 115 miles north of Tegucigalpa, as saying the ship was the Erria. The officials declined to identify its nationality or port of origin.

In recent weeks, the Erria has been identified as a Danish-registered freighter used by Colonel North's associates, Albert Hakim and Richard V. Secord, to deliver weapons to the contras. Investigators suspect that the ship may have been chartered by the private network in 1985 for similar purposes by the same people.

Mr. Klein said that the weapons had not been delivered by the Erria, but he declined to say how they had been moved to Honduras.